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Dunnwyche — NCNA's Home For Tubercular Nurses

By: Phoebe Pollitt, RN

Abstract

In the early twentieth century, tuberculosis (TB), a highly contagious disease, was a leading cause of death in North Carolina. During that era, TB treatment consisted of long bed rest, proper nutrition and fresh air. About half of the people who contracted the disease died within five years. Many nurses worked as private duty nurses and lived in the homes of their patients. Unfortunately, nurses often became sick with the same diseases as the people they were caring for. Often, private duty nurses were single and had limited means. When they became ill, many could not afford private nursing care for themselves and had nowhere to live.

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Dunnwyche — NCNA's Home for Tubercular Nurses

By Dr. Phoebe Pollitt, RN; Nursing History Council Member

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At the 1911 annual meeting of the North Carolina State Nurses Association (as NCNA was called at that time), Birdie Dunn, RN, proposed the organization build and manage a home for nurses in ill health. NCSNA President Mary Wyche described it as a facility "where refined surroundings and moderate cost of living might be obtained."

NCSNA enthusiastically agreed to support this effort. Dr. Archer, a Black Mountain TB specialist, donated two acres of land near his home for the facility and later treated the nurse/patients free of charge. Nurses across the state held bake sales, tag sales and sold dolls created in the likeness of student nurses to raise money to support their new institution, named Dunnwyche, to honor nursing leaders Birdie Dunn and Mary Wyche. The Board of Managers was made up of seven nurses representing local nursing associations across the state.

Dunnwyche accepted its first patients in 1913. Amenities included fresh spring water, electricity, a furnace, nine bedrooms (according to Wyche "with a special feature being the splendid, screened sleeping porches"), and a bathroom on each floor. In addition, there was a cow for milk, chickens to supply eggs and a pig. The staff of three consisted of a head nurse, and female and male assistants.

Each of the seven local nursing organizations was responsible for furnishing one room. Nurses across the state sent homemade crafts to brighten the rooms. As patients improved they were able to participate in automobile trips, playing the piano, listening to the Victrola, card parties and visits from friends and family to help break up the monotony of "taking the cure."

Patients were encouraged to pay \$40 a month, but this was only a fraction of the total cost of their care. By 1917, Dunnwyche faced potential bankruptcy and was only saved from imminent closure by the decision to admit tubercular men. Wyche wrote about this experience:

"It proved a happy experiment — each sex is to the other a stimulus for one's best manners, one's best looks, and we must confess one's best contentment... Personally, I prefer the 'Adamless Eden.' Morally I see no reason to bar men..."

Sadly, even after admitting male patients, the maintenance and financial stability of Dunnwyche were deteriorating. In 1918, Birdie Dunn wrote Board Member Blanche Stafford:

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"Our plans for Dunnwyche miscarried, and the summer has been one long nightmare, with the trials attending the administration of the place."

During World War I the costs of food and fuel escalated, and it became increasingly difficult to find suitable employees. In 1919, the Dunnwyche Board of Managers voted to sell the building and invest the proceeds in Liberty Bonds. Interest from these Bonds was then used to establish an NCSNA Relief Fund. Sick and disabled nurses could apply for Relief Fund monies to offset treatment costs. Dunnwyche was a valiant effort for North Carolina nurses to look after their own.